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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: SYRIA'S IRAN GAMBIT: CONSUMMATING A MARRIAGE OF
CONVENIENCE

REF: A. DAM 208

[1](#)B. DAM 214

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Syria-Iran relations resemble a strong, long-time marriage, albeit one of convenience, with Syria now being the junior partner, according to contacts, commenting on Iranian President Ahmadinejad's January 19-20 visit to Damascus. Syria and Iran sought to use the visit to demonstrate a united front against pressure from the United States and the West and to advance sometimes diverging foreign policy goals linked to Lebanon, Iraq and the Palestinians, according to this range of contacts. Based on their assessments, Syrian goals appear short-term and reflexive, further shoring up the impression that Damascus needs Tehran more than Tehran needs Damascus. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) SYRIA SEEN AS A WEAKER PARTNER: Poloffs met with a range of contacts to assess Ahmadinejad's January 19-20 visit to Damascus. Foreign policy and media professor Marwan Kabalan described Syria and Iran's relationship as a strong, long-time marriage, albeit one of convenience, with Syria now being the junior partner. Kabalan asserted that Syria and Iran also used the trip to advance regional foreign policy goals linked to Lebanon, Iraq and the Palestinians, which sometimes converge and diverge in very nuanced ways. "Friends are friends on some issues and enemies on other issues," he said. It is very, very complicated." Foreign policy analyst Sami Moubayed echoed what others have told us: Damascus and Tehran wanted to demonstrate a united front against pressure from the United States and the West. Fellow analyst and regime proxy Dr. Imad Shuebi commented that Syria wants to remind the U.S. that Syria has options if the USG wants to deal with the SARG exclusively with pressure and isolation.

[1](#)3. (C) OPPOSING VIEWS ABOUT A MARRIAGE WITH IRAN: Al-Hayat's Damascus-based correspondent Ibrahim Hamidi described two opposing views within the SARG about a decision to strengthen Syria-Iran relations: one camp sees Syria under threat with little room to pick and choose its friends; the other camp sees Iran as a much stronger force that could drag Syria into further disagreements with the U.S. and the West. The timing of the visit discomfited some SARG officials, said Hamidi, who noted that the trip followed the collapse of Iran's negotiations with the Europeans on its nuclear program.

[1](#)4. (C) ON LEBANON: Ahmadinejad's January 20 meeting in Damascus with Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah demonstrated

the continuation of Iran-Syria-Hizballah cooperation, despite the SARG's diminished influence in Lebanon, Kabalan said. The analyst called the Iranian leader's separate meeting with Lebanese Speaker Nabil Berri an effort to bolster Berri's commitment to Hizballah. Despite the continued Iran-Syria-Hizballah cooperation, however, Syria and Iran see the long-term value of their Lebanese allies quite differently, Kabalan said. Iran is seeking a long-term expansion of its influence over Lebanese Shiites and needs Syria, which is secular and ethnically diverse, to legitimize the Iran-Hizballah relationship in the eyes of Lebanese minorities, Kabalan said. For the SARG, Hizballah and Lebanese Shiites are tools that could be discarded once the Golan Heights are regained, Kabalan asserted.

15. (C) ON IRAQ: Hamidi, echoing other observers, commented on what he perceived as differences in statements made by Asad and Ahmadinejad about the visit at a joint press conference. He focused in particular on their remarks about the need for stability in Iraq. Ahmadinejad's desire for stability in Iraq reflected a belief that this would hasten a U.S. withdrawal and provide the basis for tightening its already powerful grip on Iraq, Hamidi said. Asad was more reticent in his public statements on Iraq, possibly reflecting SARG discomfort over the notion of greater Persian and Shiite influence in Iraq and a desire to see its non-Iranian, Sunni allies exert more control, Kabalan said. As evidence of this, Moubayed pointed to the SARG's traditional alliance with Sunni tribes on the border and with Moqtada al-Sadr, who has taken political positions at odds with Iranian-supported Iraqi Shiite leaders.

16. (C) ON PALESTINIAN GROUPS: Both countries are firmly committed to support for Palestinian rejectionist groups, said Kabalan, commenting on Ahmadinejad's January 20 joint meeting at the Iranian Embassy with officials from all of the

Palestinian rejectionist groups, including Hamas leader Khaled Mish'al, Islamic Jihad chief Ramadan Shallah, the head of the Syrian-backed Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) Ahmed Jibril, and a representative of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Maher Taher. Ahmadinejad briefed the groups on Iran's standoff with the West over its nuclear program, expressed support for the Palestinian cause, and called for unity in the face of U.S. and Western pressure, Kabalan said.

In the long-term, Iran sees the Palestinians as essential for regional acceptance of Iran's Middle East presence, while Syria sees the rejectionists as an essential tool to regain the Golan Heights, Kabalan said.

17. (C) SIZING UP AHMADINEJAD: Kabalan mentioned in passing that he was part of a group that met with Ahmadinejad in the first part of the Iranian leader's visit, but, when asked about his impressions, shrugged and said, "Some people were more convinced (by his political stances)." The Iranian president focused on his country's stand-off with the U.S. and the West over its nuclear program and on Syria-Iran ties, Kabalan said. When asked about new bilateral agreements or other "deliverables," Kabalan said, "Those things will be kept secret." (Note: An Egyptian diplomat told Poloff on January 25 that he had sent to Cairo a report from a "not unreliable source" about a new Syria-Iran agreement to transfer Iranian nuclear technology to Syria. The diplomat said he had no further details that would confirm the agreement or such a transfer.)

18. (C) Other contacts offered a variety of impressions of Ahmadinejad. Shiite businessman Saeb Nahas told Charge he found the Iranian leader's remarks at the Asad Library to be very ideological and unpersuasive. Syrian MP Hashem Akkad, offering a slightly different assessment, said that he found Ahmadinejad to be very humble and modest. Alawite intellectual Hassan Abbas commented that Ahmadinejad could permit himself bold statements and foreign policy adventures because he has tremendous leverage over the U.S. in Iraq.

19. (C) COMMENT: A variety of remarks and indications from

these contacts and others over the past week have made relatively clear that the enthusiastic public embrace that Asad offered to Ahmadinejad is based on the Syrian regime's appreciation of the isolation it faces and its fears of confronting U.S. and international pressure alone. In terms of Syria's foreign policy, Syrian goals appear short term and reflexive, further shoring up the impression that Damascus needs Tehran more than Tehran needs Damascus.

¶10. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: There is definitely some unease among Syrians, both regime figures and our contacts, about snuggling up to a country, led by a populist demagogue, which seems to be on an even faster track than Syria to full pariah status. While many of these Syrians over the past year have repeatedly asked why the U.S. did not try to meet the SARG even part-way toward better relations, those expressions in the run-up to the Ahmadinejad visit took on a more wistful tone. Our contacts, for example, seemed to recognize that for the foreseeable future, the die is cast. The regime has calculated, and made public with the Ahmadinejad visit, that there is no possibility -- given SARG perceptions of its interests -- of making the concessions that could lead to an improvement in ties with the U.S. The SARG is tactically casting its lot with the Iranians and hoping to improve its leverage with the Saudis and the Egyptians (who are afraid of increased Shiite influence in the region), while it moves to tighten its control, via Hizballah, over Lebanon.
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